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Rosa x damascena

[Synonyms : *Rosa belgica*, *Rosa calendarum*, *Rosa gallica* var. *damascena*, *Rosa polyanthos*]

DAMASK ROSE is a prickly deciduous shrub. Of debated origin (possibly the Balkans, Asia and the Mediterranean) it has large usually very fragrant, gold-centred, white through to red flowers.

It is also known as *Damascenerros* (Swedish), *Damascenerrose* (German), *Damaskonruusu* (Finnish), *Damastroos* (Dutch), *Damaszener Rose* (German), *Golap phul* (Bengali), *Ghulab* (Urdu), *Gulabi* (Telugu), *Gulab ke phul* (Hindi), *Iro sa* (Tamil), Monthly rose, *Penimirpushpam* (Malayalam), *Rosa de essenza* (Italian), *Ruža damascénska* (Slovak), *Růže damascénská* (Czech), *Růže damašská* (Czech), *Růže turecká* (Czech), *Shatapatri* (Sanskrit), Summer damask rose, and York and Lancaster; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of bashful love, beauty always new, brilliant complexion, conflict, freshness of complexion, war, and you are young and brilliant.

Steam distillation of the petals (harvested at dawn) yields the oil otto (or attar) of roses.

Damascena means ‘of or from Damascus (Syria)’ – the place from which Robert de Brie is supposed by some to have brought this species in 1570 when he returned from the Crusades to his castle in Champagne (north-eastern France) and introduced it to France.

Some authorities believe that the damask rose was first cultivated in Persia (now Iran).

The flower is depicted on the remains of the walls of the Palace of Knossos in Crete which was built in about 2000 BC. By at least 650 BC the ancient Greeks were writing about the plant’s medicinal qualities – and the Greek historian, Herodotus (c.485-425 BC) refers to its scent as excelling beyond all others.

These roses were familiar to the Romans too. But for some reason they entered semi-obscurity in Europe from the end of the Roman Empire until well into the 16th Century when the Italian botanist, Pietro Andrea Matthioli (1501-1577), is said to have noted their re-emergence in 1544.

Although many authorities believe that the damask rose reached western Europe with the monks in the 1100s and then with the Crusaders in the following Century as they returned from fighting in the Middle East, the plant seems to have taken another two or three centuries more to cross the Channel to England. It is said that this species was only introduced to England in 1520 from some authorities say Italy (others France) by a Court physician to Henry VIII, Dr. Linacre. (The suggested French introduction might have been a little difficult if it did not appear in France until about 1570 as proposed by some authorities.) In England it was known for a time as the ‘York and Lancaster’ as further recognition of the union of the two opposing eponymous Royal Houses at the end of the 15th Century.

There are several references to damask roses in the plays of the celebrated English dramatist, William Shakespeare (1564-1616) but authorities doubt that this specific rose is necessarily meant. In *The Winter’s Tale* for example the Rogue, Autolycus, sings

Lawn, as white as driven snow;
Cyprus, black as e’er was crow;
Gloves, as sweet as damask roses;
Masks for faces,

The play was written in 1610 or 1611 and authorities note that at that time audiences would have been familiar with the phrase

..... as sweet as damask roses

– which embraced the sweet scent of any damask rose not this species alone.

Like the dog-rose (*Rosa x canina*), the damask rose is believed to have been introduced to eastern North America (both in Virginia and further north around Massachusetts) by early European settlers. It can be seen today among those growing in Williamsburg at the Governor's Palace Gardens with the other species thought to have been brought to the Continent at the same time.

Bulgaria held the prime position in the world until the end of the 20th Century for the manufacture of rose oil– made particularly from this species (and to a lesser extent from the cabbage rose (*Rosa x centifolia*) and *Rosa alba*) since the now traditional process permeated Europe. A profusion of plants can still be found in the Valley of the Roses around Kazanlâk, between Sofia and the Black Sea, where they were once tended by over 200,000 people. (240 lb. of petals are needed to produce 1 lb. of Otto of roses.)

The French used the Damask rose when they began to make rose oil and rose water in the 18th Century.

The oil is generally used today in perfumery and cosmetics, and as a flavouring agent by the food and drinks industries.

It is the birthday flower for 12th August.